



# Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice

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## **Testimony of Mark A. Mitchell M.D., MPH President of the Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice In Support of Asthma Funding Before the Appropriations Health and Hospitals Subcommittee February 20, 2009**

My name is Dr. Mark Mitchell and I am President of the Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice. I would like to speak in favor of restoring the \$150,000 in funding for the Community Asthma Outreach and Education Program of Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice. The program has been part of the Children's Health Initiative and was previously funded through the Tobacco Settlement Funds. It appears as though the Children's Health Initiative is proposed to be funded at a 90% level from general funds in the Governor's budget, although I have not been able to get confirmation of this.

Asthma is a problem of epidemic proportions. Rates of asthma are increasing in New England, yet not increasing in any other region of the nation. Asthma hospitalization and emergency room rates in urban areas of the state are 2 to 3 times higher than the state average. Asthma is the leading cause of school absenteeism due to chronic disease. Asthma is a leading cause of absenteeism at work for those that who have asthma or for parents of children who have asthma.

The Community Asthma Outreach and Education Program identifies the people who are most likely to end up in the emergency room or admitted to the hospital due to asthma and encourages them to seek help before they are hospitalized or rushed to the emergency room. Specifically we aim to educate low-income people, people on Medicaid, Blacks and Latinos, and the uninsured to identify uncontrolled asthma symptoms in their family and friends and encourage them to seek medical care before the symptoms become severe.

The program has several components. One is the Asthma Speakers Bureau, a grassroots group of trained lay people who give presentations in churches, schools, public housing projects and homeless shelters explaining the symptoms and triggers of asthma to large numbers of people who either have or are likely to know of someone with undiagnosed asthma. The speakers also explain how to avoid asthma attacks that can result in emergency room visits or hospitalization by avoiding asthma triggers and seeking out medical assistance early. The Asthma Speakers Bureaus are based in Bridgeport, New Haven and Hartford.

In addition to the Speaker's Bureau, other components of the Community Asthma Outreach and Education Campaign include radio and TV promotion statewide; posters in Bridgeport and New Haven; as well as bus placards and billboards in Bridgeport.

This effectiveness of the Asthma Outreach and Education Program has been borne out by a recent random telephone survey of 300 Bridgeport residents. Two thirds of the respondents indicated that they had heard of the Asthma Speakers Bureau. Sixty percent of those who had heard of the program stated that they acted on the information they had received; mostly by talking to their friends and family about asthma if they had no symptoms themselves, or if they did have symptoms of asthma they sought more information or medical assistance for asthma. This is a remarkable response for a community outreach and education initiative and shows us that tens of thousands of people are responding to the program in Bridgeport alone.

We pay for untreated asthma as taxpayers and users of the health care system. According to a 2008 CT Department of Public Health Report on Asthma in Connecticut:

- Between 2003 and 2005 the total yearly cost of hospitalization for child asthma was at \$9,877,000, which comes out to about \$6,678 per child with a diagnosis of asthma. 54% has been borne by the public through Medicaid.
- Between 2003 and 2005 total yearly cost of hospitalization for adult asthma was at \$37,439,000 or at \$12,100 per adult with a diagnosis of asthma. 64% of this cost has been borne by the public through Medicaid.
- Between 2000 and 2004, the total yearly cost of emergency room visits for children diagnosed with asthma was at \$3,789,000 which comes out to \$527 per visit. 55% of this cost has been borne by the public through Medicaid.
- Between 2000 and 2004, the total yearly cost of emergency room visits for adults diagnosed with was at \$9,633,000 which comes out to \$652 per visit. 45% of this cost has been borne by the public through Medicaid.

The Asthma Outreach and Education Program saves the state money when we refer people who have symptoms of asthma to health professionals and avoid hospitalization or emergency room visits. *If through our outreach and education work, we are able to reduce emergency visits by only one-half of 1% we will have saved the state more than the cost of the program.* That's why it is so important to keep this prevention program.

Thank you for your consideration of people with asthma and their families.